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Sara Sahni
American Spirit

Rachna bunches her shoulders, exhaling a breath of sweetness from syrupy *khoa galub jaman*, her after school snack. She slumps in the kitchen chair while looking out the bay window, her complacent gaze serene like lotus flowers. She's forgotten about the wrinkled notebook paper sandwiched between the pages of her spelling book. Her body, dimpled with baby fat, shifts methodically, slightly rocking the feet of the chair. The house is still. Only Rachna and I are home. While I fry Ranjeet's favorite meal for hot sticky days like today—spinach and potato fried *pakor*as rubbed in curry toppled over sweet-smelling *basmati* rice—I see Rachna from the corner of my eye, intermittently nursing the ball of her thumb in her lily-thin mouth. The Arizona blistering September heat rubs up against red-hot oil, splaying my skin with a clinging, indiscernible smell.

"Rachna baby, what's wrong?"

"Mummy, when is Papa coming home?"

"Soon, *beta*. Only an hour or so more. Papa is very busy."

"The Chevron is busy, Mummy? No, Papa promised he'd take me for pizza! *Today*. He said so yesterday at the store!" She throws her arms over her head in protest, her chapped lips ballooning into a pout. "I don't want Indian food! I want pizza!"

"*Chup!* Quiet! Start your homework. Enough daydreaming. Time for news now. You sit with me or do your homework. Your choice."

"Sit with you!" she bellows, her bright eyes snowy with anticipation. I turn off the wok; I have made plenty of *pakor*as for now. My body moves slowly to the living room couch, my ankles swollen and too heavy to hold me up. Rachna bounces like all happy little girls do, pulling at the hem of my *sari*. Her truthful, innocent eyes cannot grasp the week's terrifying ache. She says her schoolteacher talks about the twin towers collapsing and lets

Rachna and her classmates draw and paint with colors from the rainbow during milk breaks. No one is the same anymore. We all seem a little shorter as if time suddenly stood still. We carry yesterday's pain on our backs.

"Bus, beta. Come, sit." I sink into the couch, the cream color of *paratha* dough, resting my limp body. I let out a deep, sonorous sigh while Rachna collapses into my lap.

"Mummy, I want to watch *Blues Clues!* No, *Sesame Street*. Yes, *Sesame Street*. Please Mummy!"

"Shhh. Enough baby, enough. It's not on now. Be good, beta. Papa is coming home soon." Her face softens into a pillow as I click on the TV. We watch Peter Jennings. Such a handsome man. Agnes, who works the second shift at the convenient store on weekends, doesn't like him. She says he sleeps around too much with women half his age.

I close my eyes for a few minutes of peace. The news settles Rachna into a drowsy dream. Taciturn and sleepy faced, she is twisted up in my arms. Peter Jennings' clean, American inflection washes away my nagging ache. It whispers reassurance. An American flag sways behind him, full of promise. America will heal he says. *We will overcome*. I want to believe him. So badly. And then his voice falters: the placid fluidity of his voice dissipates and all that is left are corrosive words, words that burn in my belly: *Louisiana Congressman John Cooksey told a radio show this morning: "If I see someone driving that's got a diaper on his head, that guy needs to be pulled over." He later apologized.* I shut down. Surely this is a mistake. A Congressman? Maybe I imagined it. Yes, it must be. Illusive *maya* is getting the best of me. And it happened in Louisiana. Pushpa Auntie says Louisiana is for crazies because there's too much drinking and too many loose women. Mesa is different, a nice quiet town. So many people like us here. Mrs. Lewis from next door brings chocolate-laden brownies and kite-shaped cookies for Rachna and Simon on their birthdays. Elderly Mr. Rodriguez from across the street asks Simon to mow his lawn. And Simon: only ten years old and struggling on the battlefield of the playground. I wish I could rub away his life-long ache. At least he's safe at the store with Ranjeet after school lets out. Last year boys at the school playground beat up Simon with their eighty-five dollar Nike tennis shoes. The boys left silver dollar size cuts on his gangly, little coffee-colored body. They unraveled his turban, the lasting symbol of our heritage. Layer after layer, folds of midnight blue fabric piled around his neck, his long black hair cascading down to his mid-waist. They taunted and jeered until the young, blond, blue-eyed Miss Taylor, the school counselor, ran outside to pull the boys' twisted bodies apart. The schoolmaster rang me at home saying *please take your son. He's causing problems at school*. In our Volvo station wagon, I left our modest two-story home to free Simon from the soul-chilling day. We pulled him from the red bricked public school. A few days later, Pushpa Auntie sent money for Simon to attend private school; she said it's safer there.

"Rani, we're home!" Ranjeet says in a slow, soft melodic voice. Simon is behind him, feet shuffling against the bone white kitchen tile. Leaving Rachna to sleep on the couch, I walk to the kitchen to greet them.

"*Satsriakal*," I say softly. My heart pulses as I kiss Ranjeet's thick bearded cheek. In return, twenty-two years of love flicker in his eyes. Simon peeks out

from behind his father's leg, timid to embrace me. I bend down to hug his thin cocoa frame; he smells of hot dogs and gasoline.

"Did you have a snack at the store, beta?" With a shy smile he nods yes, and scurries upstairs to his bedroom speckled with Pokemon. He runs to his daydream world to escape the day's nagging pain.

"How was work?"

"Fine, fine. Simon worked hard today. Little Rachna asleep?"

"Hajee." His face looks old as lotus root, weary and worn down. I take his hand, rubbing my stretched fingers against his rough, calloused hands. His almond-shaped eyes are generous and loving. His eyes melt the hardest of hearts. On sun-dripped mornings at the store he gives doughnuts and coffee to the homeless. Pushpa Auntie says they are no-name people; why waste money on people with no name? Young university students interested in Indian ways ask him about Indian right-wing politics and enlightenment. He offers them *chai* and reminisces about the old country. A redheaded boy named Henry once wrote a paper on him for an Asian Studies class. But it is the children who love Ranjeet the most. Any day of the week you see his clenched fists open up with colored candies inside, free gifts to the children of Mesa. He loves the store; his breathless affection gleams from his starry black pupils. Just outside the store, he grows vinca for happiness and sage for purity, replacing the shrubs from owners past.

Ranjeet looks exhausted; his eyes crease into sail-shaped pockets of skin. His brown eyes glow like summer fireflies, warming my pained heart. Worry pinches his skin, leaving its indelible mark. "*Darjee*, what's wrong? What is it? Come. Sit here at the table." He cups his face into his age-burnt hands, folding his torso over his thick masculine thighs. I murmur soft, inaudible prayers while massaging his back with my left hand. I see sadness written on his face.

"Business is suffering for everyone. No one . . . no one is going to Davinder and Rajan's gas stations in the Valley. It's . . . what do they say? Boycott." His voice shakes, broken down by sorrow.

"I don't understand, why?" I exclaim.

"They say . . ." He falls silent, his words sliced in half. "The people are saying Davinder and Rajan laughed and cheered while watching . . . watching the buildings collapse." I sit in horror, watching the words fall from my husband's pallid lips.

"But . . . but there's no TV! They have no TV in any of them! No TV!"

"And the people . . . in the stores, if you only could see them. They are telling us we are unwanted, asking us to go back to our country. I don't know . . . I don't know where to go back. This is my country, I tell them. This place." I picture their hate-suffused faces, the words thrown like a rock into the street. Ranjeet's heart-ache pours from his limbs. He's not angry, only paralyzed by the grief of his Sikh brothers. I can see his *khanda* hovering beside him, the double-edged sword of courage. He is a true Sikh, faithful to the *Khalsa*, the brotherhood of soldier-saints. In another lifetime, the *Khalsa* was the holy Guru Gobind Singh's chosen ones, the generation of wise and pious freedom fighters and protectors. Ranjeet's *Khalsa* spirit simmers inside his heart, rooted in courage, loyalty, and devotion. He mourns the losses of his Sikh brothers with forgiving eyes. He says people here

are scared of the violence happening again; this is why they hate us. This is why they speak with such hateful words. Ranjeet's soft and understanding melodic voice echoes in my ears. His faithful, loving spirit gleams from his sweet and loving smile.

But I am not so blessed. Not so forgiving. Something inside implores me to scream, to rip the heavy air that consumes us. It's too still. My father used to say I had a temper like a man and had no religious sense to put out the fire. He said to respect more, speak less. I feel it stir within me now, a fiery rage wanting to spill out. But I cannot. The children must not worry. They must not be scared. They must love this country, to welcome it with open arms as it welcomed us years ago. I garner strength that's been unused for moons of time, wiping away stored collections of dust.

"Dharjee, let me fix you some food. Come." I sit up from the table to prepare dinner. Tonight I will wipe away the day's mess of reminders. It will be a special meal. I will gingerly dash just the right amount of *garum masala* into the cool creamy yogurt sauce; yes, not too spicy, not too mild.

My heart palpitating, I savor Ranjeet's sweet almond eyes and cocoa brown skin. His lips are like two crescent moons making love. He's in a far away place. *I'm here, I'm here*, I whisper. He sits silently until he hears Rachna's baby-soft footsteps scurry down the hall. Forcing the weight of his body from the seat of the chair, he stands up, shoulders back, chest forward. Little Rachna runs to her Papa, calling his name in her sing-song voice. He picks her up, playfully throwing her into the air like the skateboarding boys outside the store who throw butter popcorn into the gummy Arizona air, waiting for the popped kernels to dribble down their open mouths. Rachna giggles, clasp ing her arms around her Papa's neck, relaying the day's events at school. Ranjeet sits down, collapsing against the back of the chair with Rachna tangled up in his lap. Simon tumbles down the stairs, running to his father's lap; he motions to Rachna that it's his turn to climb up. Before Rachna can claim her voice to protest, Ranjeet shifts Rachna to his left leg and lifts Simon up onto his right, tenderly pinching their dimpled cheeks. The air, peppered with *masala* and the love-sounds of children laughing, smells of home. Yes, tonight will be special.

* * *

The children are asleep. Ranjeet is in the bathroom brushing his teeth. I'm lying in bed wearing my new nightgown from Sears. It is thin and airy. I love the color, the same violet blue as the vinca flowers that grew outside my parents' home in Delhi. The room smells of freshly burned sage. Pushpa Auntie says it's good for cleansing the soul. I bought a bundle at Lakshmi's Indian grocery last week. The two-lipped leaves are supposed to wipe away evil spirits. Lakshmi, the grocery owner, says it's good for new beginnings. *Solves any problems, especially marriage ones. Helps in bed, you know.* I'm not tired. The muscles in my body are taut, clenched. I don't want Ranjeet to go to the store tomorrow. Doesn't seem safe. Doesn't seem right. He turns off the bathroom light and rests his wilted body on the bed.

"Rani, will you help me?" Ranjeet says, his young, pine soap-smelling hands pointing to his cherry red turban. I sit up and walk on all fours to the center of the bed. Kneeling on the orange sherbet colored blanket Ranjeet's mother made for our fifth anniversary, I run my fingers through the folds of bundled fabric. Bobby pins from the Super X drugstore clasp his courage into place. I methodically remove each one, watching each section of thin fabric fall to the base of his shoulders. The air is still, quiet. Ranjeet's head arches back towards my ample breasts as I unravel each remaining fold, his uncut hair tumbling out. How lovely Ranjeet is. My love for him beats uncontrollably. I want to be with him always, to see his sweet almond shaped eyes every time I open my own.

"Ranjeet, why not stay home tomorrow? A little holiday, no? Maybe Agnes could work? She always asks for more days."

"Rani, I need to go. Things need to be taken care of," he quietly whispers. He can see my face scrunched in pain.

"Everything will be fine, Rani."

"But what if someone says something? Does something? The pale boys that run in the street all the time broke one of the Gudwara's windows two days ago. They threw rotten tangerines at Guru Kaur Khalsa! I don't understand Ranjeet! I don't understand! They say we are one of them, who made those towers fall to dust! Pushpa Auntie said everyone is scared. You know Sundeep? He was trying to fly to St. Louis and they asked him to get off the plane! He had a ticket! And you should see the way they look at us when we go to the market! At the children!" Ranjeet puts his right arm around me, hoping to assuage my unbearable ache.

"Shhh . . . it's going to be ok. I promise. Shhh . . ." He says, muffling my cries. He rocks me gently like a newborn baby. It's just us and the smell of sage. He kisses my forehead while his fingers thread my hair. I feel young again. We fall into one another's embrace smooth as butter. He whispers sweet love songs in my ear calling *pyari meri jaan*, my dear Beloved. We play like young children, giggling in each other's arms, slowly drifting to sleep.

When I wake up Ranjeet has already left for work. It's seven thirty. I rub the sleep away and reach for my robe. It's a quiet, sun-drenched morning. After waking little Rachna and helping her to the bathroom, I walk downstairs to check on Simon. He's eating Lucky Charms and watching TV.

"Baby, how are you feeling?" Simon simply nods to indicate all is well. He watches too much TV; his brain will rot like all the other fourth-graders in his class. I remind myself to say something to Ranjeet about it; he will know what to do. A forceful knock at the front door interrupts my preoccupation with Simon. Still in my robe and barefoot, I answer. Pushpa Auntie, dressed in a gray and red-rimmed jogging suit, stands stoically behind the door, squeezing her sixteen-year-old daughter Mona's hand.

"Auntie, what is it?" Silence. My body is shaking and I cannot understand why. Butterflies dance in my stomach. *Did I have too many pakoras last night?* Auntie clasps my hand, telling me we must go.

"Go, go where?"

"I will tell you in the car. Mona will stay with Simon and Rachna." Mona silently nods, entering the house. Pushpa Auntie motions me to her sandalwood

brown Lincoln, such a big American car, reliable. I climb into the passenger seat with room enough for two, my right hand clutching the burgundy leathered door handle. Auntie looks peaked, weak. Somatic changes bubble inside of me. I'm afraid to breathe.

"What is it Auntie?"

"Something's happened. We must go." *The store.* Something's all wrong inside. My head is too heavy to hold up. The store is two blocks from our home. I can't keep my eyes open. Pushpa Auntie is mute with fear. I want to shake it out of her! Turn her inside out! Is it Ranjeet? *Tell me. Breathe Rani. Breathe.* I feel light, ethereal. We make a left onto High street. I can see the Chevron up ahead, glistening with American flag lights. Flashes of red, white, and blue flicker uncontrollably; it's too much to bear. Swarms of sun-dabbled, heat-exhausted people stand behind something that looks like florescent yellow measuring tape. I cannot see: something stands between reality and me. Has *maya* come to put a spell on me? The car comes to a quick halt. Pushpa Auntie nods, motioning me to go. I want to tell her to come with me. I want to tell her about last night, how sage charmed my marriage. I want to thank her for giving me a starry night of constellations, promising my family hope and new beginnings.

I tumble out of the car, running barefoot towards the store. The parking lot is filled with familiar freckled faces, some old, some young. My body feels thick and heavy like the muddy wet earth. *Ranjeet!* I yell so deep that I feel the air digging into my lungs. *Ranjeet!* I force my legs forward with quick, succinct steps; my hair flashes through the air like a streak of pepper gray lightning. My robe brushes against the hot black top that scolds my feet. Peoples' faces turn to see me. I push through the smog of people, fumbling my way to the front of the store. Our store of homemade memories. A man in uniform with eyes sweet as honey sees me. It is Thomas, Ranjeet's police friend who buys cheesy puffs and a Coke every afternoon. His hand, the color of French vanilla ice cream, grabs my left arm, pulling me underneath the yellow border. He holds me like Ranjeet once did, warm and safe. *Tell me he's here; tell me he's still inside,* I say. He rocks me gently, scrupulously sweet. I cry uncontrollably, pools of pain pour from my eyes, my voice turning to slush. He holds me underneath the searing Arizona sun whispering honeyed apologies while uniform after uniform slowly fades into the morning.

* * *

It only takes the police five hours to catch the man in the black Chevy pickup that emptied out Ranjeet's last breath. I watch it on the news from my living room, surrounded by loved ones and simple, kind-hearted strangers. We watch the man with the doughnut-rimmed belly and silvery brown hair turn himself in, never looking back. Frank Silva Roque is his name. He says I'm an American. Arrest me. Let those terrorists run wild.

Streaks of reds and purples dip into the sky's perfect blue while the sun lays its last rays against thick, heavy clouds. I sit outside on the patio wearing the *sari* Pushpa Auntie picked out from my bedroom closet only a few hours ago. The *sari* was a wedding gift from a distant cousin. So pretty. Adult sweet talk has replaced

the abrasive television noise from hours before. People fill the house like the *masala* from yesterday's dinner: neighbors, friends, no-name strangers. Some I know and remember, but many, I don't.

The phone cannot stop ringing. Only minutes ago, Ranjeet's mother cried out Punjabi tales of Rajput princes that I couldn't understand even with MCI's special long-distance service. I return outside, letting Pushpa Auntie handle all that I've forgotten. I hear her nervously give humble thanks while talking to the Indian Prime Minister. Clusters of unknown couples and families fill up the house's sudden emptiness, their gentle kindness soothing the pain in my back. I hear laughter again. Plates of food adorn Mr. Rodriguez's donated tables. Flowers in vases as tall as Rachna sit in each available space. Guru Kaur Khalsa, dressed in simple white, the color of mourning in India, stands to my left shaking hands with Thomas, who casts a Peter Jennings smile that glows like the moon. Thomas comes towards me, bending down to hug my willowy frame. Simon and Rachna run towards him covered in sticky, limp sand from playing in their sandbox with children of all ages and sizes. He turns around as they call his name in sweet, long syllables, opening his welcoming arms to Rachna and Simon's embrace. People are huddled around us, squeezing my soft shoulders and stroking my uncut hair, their eyes fixed on the children. Thomas scoops up Rachna like ice cream in the summer time, playfully tossing her into the air. She giggles, burping up bubbles of sweetness. I muster up the strength to sit up, bits of courage seeping in. Simon lightly skips a few feet towards me, wrapping his baby boy arms around my right leg. Pushpa Auntie returns from inside, and takes hold of my hand. It's calm, peaceful outside. Surrounding gentle faces warm my insides. A mild breeze glides across my shoulders, brushing against my *sari*, the color of sunlight, as I playfully ruffle Simon's hair. Simon arches his head back, his lips rising to kiss the crest of my right thigh. Unexpected solace slips in slowly. *Ranjeet.* I can feel him inside my heart, his *Khalsa* spirit rising. Rising. Rising.

(For Balbir Singh Sodhi 1953-2002)